DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 276 068 CS 505 390

AUTHOR Giddings, Louise R.
TITLE The History of a Communications Skills Laboratory in the Middle School of New York State School District.
PUB DATE [86]
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Skills; English Curriculum; *English Instruction; Grade 7; *Heterogeneous Grouping; Junior High Schools; Middle Schools; Multimedia Instruction; Nonverbal Communication; Program Development; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Programs; Remedial Reading; Secondary Education; Teaching Methods; Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

An innovative communication skills laboratory, created in 1971 at the middle school of the Greenburgh School District of New York State, focused on non-verbal communication, as well as the language arts and literature. The laboratory was designed to replace an English program that stigmatized low achievers and separated them from their peers. A workshop involving the laboratory teachers and participants from Teachers College, Columbia, was held during the summer of 1971 to design more specific plans for the laboratory. Participants in the workshop outlined the overall goal of the program: to facilitate students' ability to acquire, interpret, evaluate, and communicate knowledge so that they can use that knowledge to deal sensitively and creatively with their environment. When the program began, all 270 seventh grade students in the school were assigned a class period in the laboratory. Although it has been used in a variety of ways since its inception, the basic concept of the laboratory as a mechanism for flexible and heterogeneous groups of students to develop skill in language and communication remains. (SRT)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED276068

The History of A Communications Skills Laboratory in the Middle School of New York State School District

by: Louise R. Giddings

The Communication Skills Laboratory which presently exists in the middle school of the Greenburgh School District of New York State was installed in the fall of 1971. The innovation replaced an English program which was believed by some teachers to stigmatize low achievers and separate them from their peers. The Communication Skills Laboratory was designed to help students develop skills in many communication areas within a setting based on unity with diversity. According to the plan for the program, the innovation was intended to focus on non-verbal communication such as pantomime, body language, and photography, as well as on the language arts and literature. Moreover the program was developed to foster growth in critical thinking, creative thinking, self-instruction, self-evaluation, and a sense of inquiry.

The following needs are stated in the rationale of the proposal for the Communication Skills Laboratory:

a. the need to assist students who are handicapped in reading or not interested in reading.
b. the need for the development of all verbal communication skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) and greater accountability for said development.
c. the need for taking the stigma away from students who seek the help of the reading teacher.
d. the need to teach developmental reading to students reading on or above grade level.
e. the need for internal consistency in the curriculum.
f. the need for more flexible grouping according to needs and strengths of individual students so each can move at his rate of learning.
g. the need to help students become fluent in the language of ideas (academics--mathematics, science, social studies, etc.) as well as their social language.
h. the need to help students see the interrelatedness of subject areas.
i. the need for using a multimedia approach to learning since we live in a multi-sensory, electronic age.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Louise R. Giddings

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS505 390

j. the need for teachers to begin to pool and share their strengths so that more students can benfit from these strengths.
k. the need for greater self-awareness and improved interpersonal relationships between and among students and staff. [1]

In addition to the above points in the proposal, it was also stated that through the Communication Skills Laboratory, the staff expected to gain "greater insight into how flexible and heterogeneous groupings are effective for better learning." [2]

The English program in the seventh grade middle school of the Greenburgh School District of New York State became a focal point for discussion during the 1970-1971 school year. Dissatisfaction with the program was voiced by the reading teacher in the school. Having worked with both teachers and students in the program during the year, this teacher perceived a certain amount of inflexibility in the instructional methods used in English classes. Developmental reading which emphasized comprehension and vocabulary development was a part of the English program. Teachers were concerned with giving students background skills for reading in content areas. The English teachers also worked with students in grammar, composition, literature, and skill development in all the language arts areas. The reading teacher assisted the English program staff, which consisted of two full-time English teachers and four foreign language teachers who each taught one class of English per day, by consulting with them concerning their classroom programs and by working with students with special needs.

---

[1]Vilma France, "Proposal for Combining the 7th Grade English and Reading Programs into a Communication Skills Laboratory Manned by a Team of Three Teachers and the Reading Teacher," May 5, 1971, p. 1.

[2]Ibid., p. 4.

3.

Regarding her work with special students in remedial reading, the reading teacher believed that these students were stigmatized by having to leave their English classes to engage in extra work in reading. She felt that the English and reading programs needed to be reassessed and changes instituted. Concern with the situation led this teacher to consult the principal of the school and the assistant superintendent for instruction in the district about the possibility of curricular changes.

During the discussions with the principal and with the assistant superintendent for instruction, a proposal for combining the English and reading programs into a Communication Skills Laboratory to be manned by a team of teachers was suggested by the reading teacher. In May of 1971, a formal proposal for the Communication Skills Laboratory was submitted to the assistant superintendent for instruction. Copies of the proposal were sent to the school principal, the high school English chairman and to an English teacher in the seventh grade middle school.

The following 'Expectations listed in the proposal give a summary statement of the desired curricular changes:

1. A classroom climate conducive to students and teachers learning from each other using a variety of approaches, styles, and materials.

2. Increased accountability--Teachers and students should be better able to identify specific weaknesses, strengths progress and achievement in all four skills areas.

3. Internal consistency in the seventh grade English and reading curriculum.

4. Greater insight into how flexible and heterogeneous groupings are effective for better learning.

5. A first step toward associative teaching and planning with implications for the district and particularly the middle school.

6. Increased self-awareness and improved interpersonal relationships among the between students and staff.[1]

---

[1] Vilma France, "Proposal for Combining the 7th Grade English and Reading Programs into a Communication Skills Laboratory Manned by a Team of Three Teachers and the Reading Teacher," May 5, 1971.

The proposal was approved by the assistant superintendent for instruction, and then presented to and approved by the Board of Education. The decision to adopt the new program involved approval of only a general outline for the program which had been developed and submitted by the reading teacher. Announcement of the plan for the new program for the 1971-1972 school year was made to the faculty of the middle school by the school principal.

A two and a half week workshop was held at the middle school during July, 1971 for the purpose of designing more specific plans for the Communication Skills Laboratory. The following participants were involved in the development and clarification of the plans for curricular change: (1) the reading teacher, (2) two of three teachers selected to work with the reading teacher in the new program, and (3) four participant-observers from Teachers College, Columbia University. As the workshop proceeded, there was a collaborative effort on the part of the teachers and the participant-observers who were graduate students in curriculum to develop a curriculum design for the Communication Skills Laboratory based on the rationale and expectations cited in the proposal.

During the first few days of the workshop, the teachers worked together, getting acquainted with one another and attempting to define objectives for the program. When the graduate students joined the workshop, they assisted the teachers by:

1. helping the teachers to identify curriculum design components.
2. raising questions to alert teachers to possible problems in the curriculum plans.
3. bringing in teacher and student materials related to the intents of the program.
4. making suggestions based on study and analyses of the curriculum plans.

On one occasion during the workshop, the assistant superintendent for instruction visited a planning session and offered comments and observations concerning the planning which was taking place. The principal also visited a planning session of the workshop. Throughout the workshop, however, the reading teacher served as coordinator to a large extent by giving leadership to the workshop activities and by pooling the resources of the participants.

The following general observations were included in the summary of the analysis of the design by this investigator:

> Firstly, although the design gives attention to major elements of curriculum, the attention given is quite broad and appears to be somewhat lacking in giving sufficient guidance to learning opportunities for students. It is difficult to identify any activities or opportunities rooted in suggested materials and instructional methods.
>
> In a more positive light, however, it may be observed that the design does make provision for the criterion of balance in a number of ways. There is consideration of the development of attitudes, as well as of ideas and skills. The design also indicates that that various methods of instruction will be used in the Laboratory. Furthermore, although teachers in the workshop indicated that a central core of reading will be used for all the students, the design seems to provide for a wide variety of literature for use with the five units. Besides, it appears that a common core of reading materials for a group of students who have a wide diversity in reading abilities would be in conflict with the rationale of the design, as well as in conflict with some of the personal-social goals stated in the Preliminary Report.
>
> Finally, the point should be made that although the design seems to present some indequacies at this time, it is structured within a framework which is open and flexible. Therefore, adjustments can be made and the design can be improved as needs and analyses indicate.[1]

The teachers stated that they needed to meet with students before making highly structured plans for curriculum and instruction. Furthermore, they recognized the fact that the contributions of all members of the Communication Skills Laboratory team were needed in planning for the program, yet one member of the team had been unable to attend the planning sessions for the program. One teacher also pointed out following the workshop that the participant-observers from Teacher College, Columbia University could have been more helpful if they had made information concerning other innovations available to the teachers.

---

[1] Louise Rudolph, "Report on the Webb School Communication Skills Laboratory Workshop" (prepared for Greenburgh School District August 23, 1971).

The graduate students indicated that they believed they made significant contributions in helping the teachers to plan for the new program. Yet they expressed the idea that they did not feel that they made a major impact in trying to persuade teachers to plan and organize specific learning opportunities for the program. A questionnaire administered to the teachers by this investigator following the workshop revealed that the focus on process goals and personal-social goals in the plan for the Communication Skills Laboratory may have caused the teachers to place less emphasis on the development of content and specific learning opportunities for the program.

As a result of the efforts of the planning team, a report entitled "Preliminary Report: Communication Skills Laboratory Design" was developed. The overall goal for the program as stated in this report was:

> To facilitate each student's ability to acquire, interpret, evaluate and communicate knowledge so that he can use that knowledge to deal sensitively and creatively with his environment.[1]

Following the approval of the proposal for the Communication Skills Laboratory, a supervisory group interviewed and selected three new teachers to participate as staff members of the Laboratory along with the former reading teacher. The interviewing team included the reading teacher, the principal of the middle school, the assistant superintendent for instruction and the high school English chairman in the district.

The three teachers selected were new to the system. One teacher was a master's degree intern who would be in her first year of teaching; the other two teachers had experience in teaching in other innovative situations. All three teachers indicated interest in working with academically and socio-economically heterogeneous groups, gave evidence of proficiency in teaching all or some of the communication skills, and were amenable to the idea of team planning and team teaching.

---

[1] Vilma France and Others, "Preliminary Report: Communication Skills Laboratory Design" (Hartsdale, N.Y.: Webb School, July 22, 1971).

With the beginning of the 1971-1972 school year, all 270 seventh grade students in the school were assigned to the Communication Skills Laboratory. Approximately fifty-four students per period met with the teachers in the Communication Skills Laboratory during each of the five periods of the program. Although the Laboratory has been used in a variety of ways since its inception, the basic concept of the Laboratory as a mechanism for flexible and heterogeneous groups of students to develop skill in language and communication remains.

The investigator became involved in the development of the Communication Skills Laboratory during the summer of 1971 as a workshop participant-observer and continued to work with the program during its first year of operation. During this time, the investigator was engaged in field work related studies in curriculum and instruction at Teachers College, Columbia University.

References

France, Vilma. "Proposal for Combining the 7th Grade English and Reading Programs into a Communication Skills Laboratory. Manned by a Team of Three Teachers and the Reading Teacher." Prepared for the Greenburgh Central School District, Greenburgh, New York, May 5, 1971.

France, Vilma et al. "Preliminary Report: Communication Skills Laboratory Design." Prepared for the Greenburgh Central School District, Greenburgh New York, July 22, 1971.

Rudolph, Louise. "Report on the Webb School Communications Skills Laboratory Workshop. "Prepared for Greenburgh Central School District, Greenburgh, New York, August, 1971.